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ABSTRACT

A process called focused holistic scoring has been developed for use in the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills to assess student performance on writing samples. This process is "holistic" because it evaluates a total piece of writing, and it is "focused" because it evaluates the writing in terms of two specific objectives identified for the writing sample: organizing ideas in writing and responding appropriately to purpose and audience. All holistic scoring is based on the concept that a valid assessment of writing depends upon the examination of a sample of writing as a totality. Language conventions and handwriting are not considered unless they are so serious that they interfere with the communication of the writer's ideas. The procedures used for focused holistic scoring require independent readings by two trained scorers for each paper. Before scoring ever begins, a complete scoring guide has been developed for each item. It includes the following elements: the aim of the writing exercise, the exercise itself, the rationale for the exercise, constraints upon the exercise, descriptors of score points, and sample student responses. This booklet contains an example of a complete focused holistic scoring guide for an exit level writing test. (Author/BW)

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TABS

TEXAS ASSESSMENT OF BASIC SKILLS

Focused Holistic Scoring of TABS Writing Samples

EXIT LEVEL

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Texas Education Agency
Division of Curriculum Development
Austin, Texas
1980

TEXAS ASSESSMENT OF BASIC SKILLS

Focused Holistic Scoring Of TABS Writing Samples

EXIT LEVEL

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INTRODUCTION

This publication presents information on the process called focused holistic scoring used for the writing sample portion of the TABS test. It contains a description of that process as well as a sample exit level item, scoring guide, and student responses.

This material will help teachers understand both item development and scoring processes for a writing sample item. It may also serve as a guide for teachers and curriculum specialists to use in developing practice items for students similar to those on TABS.

Superintendents are encouraged to duplicate this material for English language arts teachers in Grades 7-12 who prepare students to take the TABS writing test.

FOCUSED HOLISTIC SCORING

A process called focused holistic scoring has been developed for use in the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills to assess student performance on the writing sample portion of the test. This process is "holistic" because it evaluates a total piece of writing, and it is "focused" because it evaluates the writing in terms of two specific objectives identified for the writing sample: organizing ideas in writing and responding appropriately to purpose and audience. (See appendix for the writing objectives.) Focused holistic scoring is criterion-referenced scoring. Instead of ranking papers against each other, as in so-called classical or general impression holistic scoring, focused holistic scoring rates the papers in terms of pre-defined criteria.

All holistic scoring is based on the concept that a valid assessment of writing depends upon the examination of a sample of writing as a totality, not merely as a collection of parts. Such scoring takes into account all of the aspects of a piece of written discourse--syntax, word choice, expression of ideas, coherence, and organization--which a writer employs to accomplish a given writing task. Language conventions such as punctuation and spelling are not considered unless they are so serious that they interfere with the communication of the writer's ideas. In the TABS test, language conventions are tested directly through a series of multiple choice items. Handwriting legibility is not a consideration in the actual scoring of the writing sample; it is reported separately with the descriptors "not ratable" (for blank papers or papers

with so little handwriting that it is not scoreable), "illegible," "hard to read," or "acceptable."

The focused holistic scoring method assesses the ability of students to write whole pieces of discourse for precisely defined purposes. The purpose may be persuasive, involving the presentation of reasons to support a point of view and to influence a particular audience to take a desired course of action; or it may be informative (sometimes called explanatory or referential), requiring the student to select or arrange details in order to report information correctly; or it may be expressive, drawing upon the student's imaginative ability to invent and connect details to express ideas and feelings.* In the first TABS assessment, the exit level test (administered to ninth grade students) presented students with a persuasive writing topic and the fifth grade test presented students with an expressive task.

The procedures used for focused holistic scoring require independent readings by two trained scorers for each paper. After each reader separately has assigned a score of 0-4 to the paper, it is routed to a clerk who compares the scores. They must match exactly--or the paper will be given a third scorer for resolution. Readers have received extensive training before scoring begins. They have discussed the score point categories and evaluated sample papers until each scorer has internalized the scoring rubric. The process also provides for continual monitoring of scorers' consistency throughout the scoring period.

Before scoring ever begins, a complete scoring guide has been developed and refined for each writing item used on a test. It includes the following elements:

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*The English Language Arts Curriculum Framework K-12 (CUO 838 01), pages 4 and 5, includes the literary use of language as a fourth purpose. The scheme used for TABS combines literary and expressive purposes into a single category.

- The aim of the writing exercise--a concise statement defining the purpose and audience.

- The writing exercise itself--the actual stimulus to which students will respond. It includes a topic that is within the legitimate range of knowledge for the students who are expected to respond. It contains all verbal/visual cues relevant to the purpose, audience, and form of writing.

- The rationale for the exercise--an explanation of what the exercise calls upon the writer to do and a description of the writing issues raised by the exercise.

- Constraints upon the exercise--a statement of the conditions in which the testing will occur and any limitations these place upon the writer or upon the scoring. For example, any time limits placed upon the writing or any special conditions imposed by a testing situation would be expected to influence student writing.

- Descriptors of score points--a definition of the general features that papers in each scoring category will exhibit. These categories represent levels of success with the requirements of the writing exercise. The preliminary description of the score points is derived directly from the item itself. It is then refined on the basis of actual student responses to the writing exercise and becomes the final scoring guide. For statewide testing, each writing item is first tried out on small groups of students, rewritten or revised on the basis of the student responses, tried out again, and revised once more. These items then are formally field tested on a large group of students before they become eligible for inclusion in the test itself.

- Sample student responses--examples of student papers, scored and annotated, to illustrate each score point. These are only samples of what papers in a given category look like and the major features they contain.

The next section of this booklet contains an example of a complete focused holistic scoring guide for an exit level writing test. The section is useful as an illustration but it is not a model in the sense that it is perfect, for it has not gone through all the stages of refinement described above. The development of each item used for the writing sample in statewide testing is a long and involved procedure that has been refined on the basis of the first year's experience with testing student writing. As TABS moves into the second year and beyond, these refined procedures should provide not only for the development of good items for the test itself but also additional items for instructional uses.

SAMPLE FOCUSED HOLISTIC SCORING GUIDE

EXIT LEVEL

Aim:

To persuade an official adult audience to follow a particular course of action.

Writing Exercise:

Some members of Congress have proposed that because of the gasoline shortage only adults over 18 should be allowed to drive cars and buy gas. Other members of Congress are against the idea.

Write a letter persuading your senator to vote for or against the proposal. Be sure to state clearly how you want him or her to vote on this issue and to give good reasons for your advice.

****

Dear Senator:

Rationale

This writing task sets up a persuasive situation that has real-life validity. It invites the writer to choose one side of an issue and to offer reasons in support of that position. The audience, a senator, is a plausible one and is clearly defined for the student. The minimally competent writer will advise the senator how he or she should vote and give some brief reasons, which are usually unconnected, for that advice. The better writer will begin to form reasons into a unified piece of writing that provides some explanation for the reasons offered.

In advising a specific audience about what course of action it should take, the writer is asked to give "good reasons" to support his or her advice. This cue is intended to signal the writer that some reasons are appropriate and some are not in making a serious statement to a public official. Every audience has certain expectations and is more convinced by some reasons than by others. Since one of the objectives being tested is "responding appropriately to purpose and audience," part of the writer's task is to present reasons which will be convincing to the specific audience. Reasons that are flippant or insulting to the audience would not be an "appropriate response." For example, the following statement may be expressive of the writer's feelings, but it is not likely to be persuasive to a senator: "This is another stupid idea from a bunch of politicians and as long as I have money to buy a car and buy gas I will."

The student is invited to write on either side of the issue. There is no "preferred" side from the point of view of the exercise itself or of the scoring guide.

The salutation for the letter is given in order to eliminate students' concern with the purely formal elements of letter-writing. This piece of writing will be judged on the organization and presentation of ideas, not on letter form.

The stimulus asks the writer to tell how "you" would advise the senator; therefore, use of the first person is clearly called for and most students will use it. Some may choose to use only third person. Neither choice will affect the scoring of a paper.

Constraints

The definition of score points must take into account the realities of the situation in which students are expected to write. For the TABS test,

two factors have special influence on the degree of stringency in scoring: the test is an exit level test of minimal competency given to ninth graders and the test allows students only 20 minutes to write. The writing task must reflect the expectation level for a student leaving high school, but it still must be within the feasible range of a ninth grader. The range of score points from 0-4 allows some adjustment for this fact since the level of minimal competence is met with a core of 2, 3, or 4. Score points 3 and 4 represent "good" and "very good" papers. However, these judgments of quality are made on what is in effect a first-draft piece of writing. Even "4" papers will contain errors and lapses that would not be there if the student had time to rewrite, revise, and edit. Teachers can rightly expect the papers written in a classroom situation, with ample time for all the stages of writing to occur, to be of higher quality than those produced in a testing situation.

There will be a wide variety of papers within each category. The scoring categories can only provide general descriptors for the major features that will be exhibited by papers in that category. From a scoring standpoint some papers will be very clearcut and others will not; therefore, the scoring guide must make sufficient distinctions about the necessary elements for each score point.

Descriptors of Score Points:

0 Regardless of how well organized and free from mechanical errors these papers are, they do not even minimally engage the required writing task. These would include blank papers, papers that say literally or in effect "I don't know," and papers that simply copy or paraphrase the assignment.

Also included are papers that obviously fail to engage the assignment in other ways. These would include papers that write about a totally

different topic and papers that exclusively respond to the fact of the assignment--for example, "I hate this assignment." In effect, this kind of paper is responding to a totally different assignment, namely "How do you feel about taking this test or writing on this topic?" However, a student who made such a statement but then proceeded to respond to the topic would be scored on that response.

Illegible papers are also included in this category.

1 These papers attempt to engage the task but are not successful at doing so. They either do not state a position or do state a position but do not offer more than a single, unelaborated reason in support of that position.

Papers that exhibit serious difficulties in controlling syntax or that contain errors and omissions in the conventions of writing to such an extent that meaning is impaired are also included in this category. In such papers, it will be very difficult to tell where one idea stops and another begins or to sort out the relationships among words and phrases.

2 These papers state a position and offer two or more good reasons (one reason would not meet the minimal requirements of the task since the item clearly specifies reasons) which usually are not elaborated or they offer one good reason that is somewhat elaborated. The lack of development or elaboration typically makes these papers skeletal and brief. When a paper achieves some length, it usually does so by repeating one or two reasons in slightly different words rather than by elaborating those reasons or by offering more reasons.

3 These papers state a position and support it with at least two elaborated reasons--that is they are explained, defined, or illustrated with examples--or they present a list of good reasons so long that the very number of them is persuasive.

There is a discernible order in the presentation of ideas even though these papers may contain some inconsistencies, repetitions, or digressions that detract from a completely clear and organized presentation of the writer's main points.

4 These papers make a decision and support it with a set of reasons that are clearly elaborated and that are systematically organized into a unified whole as evidenced by a topic sentence, thesis statement, or summarizing sentence and by transitional elements that show the relationships among the reasons presented.

There is a clear sense of completeness to the paper. The writer draws his or her ideas together and uses some concluding device. There is no information presented that does not relate directly to the topic; that is, digressions, irrelevancies, and non-purposeful repetitions have been eliminated. The writer explicitly addresses her or his response to both the identified audience (the senator) and the reason for writing (to give the writer's advice for voting on the proposal). The writer creates a tone, through arrangement of ideas and word choices, that promotes the purpose of the communication.

Sample Student Papers:

SCORE POINT: 0

The gosoline shortage only adults over 18 should are gainst the idea write to a senator or [redacted] giving your opinion of this proposal.

Annotation: an attempt to copy the stimulus

SCORE POINT: 1

Dear Senator,

I don't agree with your idea because, what if your mother is sick, and you have to take her to the hospital but you don't have enough gas to make it there, and your only 16 years old.

I think you should limit the amount of gallons to people 18 and under. I think that would solve the problem

Yours Sincerly

Annotation: one briefly elaborated reason; confusion in relationships of ideas; offers an alternate solution to the problem posed in the stimulus, but it appears to be inconsistent with the reason given

SCORE POINT: 1

Dear Sir,

As a member of congress, my opinion is not to let Her, or, His opinion past. If it past they will not buy to much gas. Because the youngest people are the one who buy most gas. I will let them buy the gas at the age of 15 year and not under. Because they parent can't buy gas for the station because of there re pertation. There parent can't drive of don't have license. If it past I would suppose that they wouldn't buy as much gas as they was. but I suppose that the gas shortage is a Big shortage so they wouldn't be able to give you some gas to children under 18, The senator will have to give a possibale answer.

Annotation: severe problems with syntax and language conventions

SCORE POINT: 2

Dear Senator:

I agee that the gasoline shortage has brought about many problems in the United States. The proposal to only allow adults over eighteen to drive cars and buy gas could only cause more trouble. This is because many people under the age of eighteen work and need transportation. Also I think this law would be very difficult to enforce.

Sincerely,

Annotation: two unelaborated reasons

SCORE POINT: 2

Dear Mr. Senator,

I think your proposal about only adults over 18 should be allowed to drive cars and buy gas doesn't make sense. There are some people who has parents that doesn't know how to drive. If the teenagers know how to drive - they have to bring there parents places and do things for him. Some people parents are too old to drive and they are very sick and they need someone to bring them place. Sometimes when parents are busy, they might ask there children to buy some gas for them. Sometimes children have to bring their

continued

parents back and forth to work. I think that it's not fair to do a thing as to stop teenagers for driving cars and buying gas

Sincerely yours,

Annotation: one elaborated reason; several specific examples provide elaboration

SCORE POINT: 3

February 21, 1980

Dear Sir:

I feel that not only adults over eighteen should be allowed to drive cars, and bury gas. Many students younger than that need to drive a car. Some students have parents who both work. This makes it very difficult or impossible for them to get to school or work and back home. Other students have parents who don't know how to drive or have a handicap and cannot drive. For these reason I feel that for some people it is a necessitly to be able to drive and bury gas before the age of eighteen.

Sincerely,

Annotation: two reasons with some elaboration; brief, but to the point; clear organization

SCORE POINT: 3

Dear Senator,

My opinion of the proposal made by the Congress about the gasoline shortage is this: I don't think it would be fare to the people under 18 if they could not drive.

I have many reasons for my opinion.

My first reason is this, there are many young teenagers with jobs who need a way to get there and the only way is by driving themselves there.

If the gasoline shortage is as bad as it sounds, what makes the Congress so sure that there will be gas for the individuals who won't be it for quite a while

continued

Another reason for my opinion is this: there are older people who need help in getting around, and the only one that is not too busy with things to do, is under 18. That person is the only one that can help.

As you can see, I strongly disagree with this proposal

Annotation: two somewhat elaborated reasons; shows sense of organization; sums up briefly; digression in middle of paper

SCORE POINT: 4

Dear Senator,

I am against the proposal for allowing only adults to buy and sell gas. The first reason is that many young people today have jobs. Some of them live alone, even though they are under eighteen, and they would have no way to get to and from work. Also many people in high school who live at home would have no feasible way to get to work since both parents work also and could not drive them. Places of business that depend on teenage workers might have to shut down because of lack of labor. Some examples are: movie theaters, fast-food restaurants and some grocery stores.

continued

Another reason that I am against the proposal is that driving a car and buying gas help to make students responsible. They must get a driver's license and learn all the rules of driving. They must drive safely and obey the law. Also, they will have to be responsible for keeping a car in good condition and for paying for gasoline to run it.

The last reason I have to give you is that driving gives teenagers some independence since they do not have to depend upon their parents to take them everywhere they need to go. In this way driving may help them learn to become mature adults who can take care of themselves.

These are some of the reasons that the proposal would be unfair to

continued

~~to~~ many young people. I hope you will vote against it and will convince other senators to do the same.

Sincerely yours,

Annotation: clear; concise; good elaboration through specific examples; thesis statement used as summary in last paragraph; definite and appropriate conclusion

APPENDIX

EXIT LEVEL

WRITING

Objective Specifications

OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate the correct spelling of commonly used words.

Skill

The student will select the correct spelling of words appearing on a list of words used frequently in written expression by adults.

Content Domain (Limits)

Spelling words shall be selected from a list of words used frequently in written expression by adults.

OBJECTIVE

Use legible handwriting for effective communication.

Skill

The student will use legible handwriting.

Content Domain (Limits)

1. The prime concern is ease of reading.

2. Specific criteria involved in handwriting instruction (i.e., slant, uniformity, or consistency of letter formation) shall not be considered unless they interfere with the ease of reading.

3. Either cursive or manuscript handwriting is acceptable.

OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate a knowledge of standard punctuation.

Skill

The student will select correct punctuation within the context of a sentence or written passage.

Content Domain (Limits)

Only the following types of punctuation shall be included:

- period at the end of statements and after abbreviations
- question mark at the end of a question
- comma between day and year, city and state, items in a series; in the salutation of a friendly letter and in closing of a letter; setting off a noun of direct address

- apostrophe in contractions
- avoidance of unnecessary commas

OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate knowledge of standard uses of capitalization.

Skill

The student will select words capitalized correctly within the context of a sentence or written passage.

Content Domain (Limits)

Only the following types of capitalization will be included:

- first word of a sentence
- pronoun "I"
- names of persons
- cities
- titles of persons
- states
- countries
- nationalities and languages
- days of the week
- months of the year
- holidays
- appropriate parts of a letter
- avoidance of unnecessary capitalization

OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate knowledge of correct English usage.

Skill

The student will select a sentence or portion of a written passage that employs the most acceptable form of standard usage.

Content Domain (Limits)

Only the following areas of word usage will be included:

- correct subject-verb agreement in person and number in which only minimal interruption occurs between subject and verb
- correct standard forms of regular and irregular verbs
- correct nominative forms as subjects
- avoidance of double negatives

OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate the ability to control sentence structure

Skill

The student will distinguish fragments and run-ons from complete sentences and demonstrate the ability to combine simple sentences and/or form coordinate or subordinate elements.

Content Domain (Limits)

1. The student will select the complete sentence from among four statements in which the other three are fragments or run-ons.

2. The student will select the correct combination of simple sentences and/or form coordinate or subordinate elements.

OBJECTIVE

Organize ideas in writing.

Skill

The student will arrange sentences into a recognizable pattern, select and arrange information to make a point, and eliminate irrelevant material.

Content Domain (Limits)

The nature of the writing stimulus will be appropriate to the interests and experiences of exit level students. The stimulus will clearly state the purpose and audience for the writing and provide sufficient verbal cues to focus the student's attention to the demands of the task.

OBJECTIVE

Respond appropriately to purpose and audience in a given writing situation.

Skill

The student will communicate effectively to a specific purpose and audience, including:

- all information or details necessary to make the writer's point clear to the reader
- the appropriate words and sentence structures that communicate clearly
- major and minor points presented so that the writer's order and purpose are clear to the reader
- the conventions of mechanics and usage appropriate to the writer's purpose and audience
- a tone, through arrangements and word choices, that promotes the purpose of communication

Content Domain (Limits)

The nature of the writing stimulus will be appropriate to the interests and experiences of exit level students. The stimulus will clearly state the purpose and audience for the writing and provide sufficient verbal cues to focus the student's attention to the demands of the task.

OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate the ability to complete commonly used forms.

Skill

The student will complete a commonly used form or recognize on a completed form those items that are correct or incorrect.

Content Domain (Limits)

1. Example: The student will complete an application form such as a driver's license application or a job application.

2. Emphasis should be given to the need for clarity and accuracy in completing the form.

COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

(1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;

(2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a non-segregated basis;

(3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;

(4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;

(5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;

(6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and

(7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; TITLE IX, 1973 EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; AND VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED IN 1974.

It is the policy of the Texas Education Agency to comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all federal and state laws and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age, or veteran status (except where age, sex, or handicap constitute a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency makes positive efforts to employ and advance in employment all protected groups.